

The Legacy of Nana Asma'u: Lessons for Today
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Nana Asma'a, daughter of the preeminent Fulani scholar, scribe, and swordsman Shehu Usman Dan Fodio, emerged in a tumultuous time. She witnessed her father's tireless efforts to correct the practice of Islam and excoriate any traces of inequality and injustice in North Western Nigeria. Asma'u was encouraged by her father to pursue education in order to lead the next generation of leaders. He imbibed in her a spirit of determination, dedication, and tenacity that helped illuminate his own path to success. That desire for education is intrinsic to all human beings and access to that most noble of endeavors should be unimpeded and universal, particularly for any society to flourish and prosper.

Her life narrates many stories to us. Principally, she teaches us that knowledge opens countless opportunities and that the best knowledge is that which enables us with the requisite tools to improve our society. The 'yan taru movement she created made possible these opportunities and aided her society in achieving many laudable goals, including women's education. Her travels by horse to remote villages to teach women through poetry – a medium that is easily accessible, innovative, and adaptable – is exemplary. These women, remarkably, would, in turn, teach other women the fundamentals of their religion. After all, educated women will be educated mothers who, also, serve to educate their own children. Learning begins at an early age and the more knowledge a woman possesses, the more a society benefits.

Asma'u devoted her life to the pursuit of knowledge, ever-cognizant of the need to make that knowledge practical and in the service of community. She led an austere existence, modeled after the simplicity and humbleness of her father's life, which allowed her to understand and empathize with the difficulties and challenges faced by others. She also pledged herself to peaceful coexistence, amidst a time of uncertainty and conflict.

The most destructive force that can enter and penetrate a society and tear it apart is hatred and intolerance. Asma'u showed that humanity enjoys many more commonalities than differences and it is this legacy that can teach us countless lessons today.